

Egypt: 5. Empire (Mehmed Ali dynasty)

KHALED FAHMY

American University in Cairo, Egypt

Throughout much of the 19th century, Cairo commanded an empire that, at its greatest expanse, covered the Sudan, Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Crete, and parts of southern Anatolia. This sudden burst of imperial expansion was the result of tensions within the Ottoman Empire of which Egypt had been a province since the early 16th century.

It was to Arabia that Egypt first expanded its influence and control. In 1811, Mehmed Ali (r.1805–1848), whom the Ottoman sultan had appointed as governor of Egypt six years earlier, dispatched a military campaign in answer to his sovereign's plea for help in subduing a Saudi Wahhabi rebellion in Arabia. After seven years of fighting, Mehmed Ali's troops inflicted a heavy defeat on the Saudis and spread Egypt's influence over large tracts of western and central Arabia.

To compensate himself for the troops he lost in Arabia, and lured by the prospect of raising an army of Sudanese slaves and of finding gold in the Sudan, Mehmed Ali then turned his attention to the south. In 1820, he sent two expeditions which, in a little over three years, managed to capture Nubia, Senar, Kordofan, and parts of Darfur. Khartoum, then only a small settlement, was chosen to be the capital of the new, unified territory of Sudan, which was now controlled by governors sent from Cairo.

Despite these successes, the Pasha failed to raise an army of enslaved Sudanese. In 1822, therefore, he took the fateful decision of

conscripting Egyptian peasants. And it is with these disciplined, well-trained troops that he then embarked on the third stage of his territorial expansion. This time it was in southern Hijaz, Arabia, where a rebellion had erupted against his rule. After suppressing this rebellion, Mehmed Ali's troops expanded to the south and captured the coastal plains of Yemen. By the mid-1820s the Red Sea had become an Egyptian lake.

The new troops soon attracted the attention of Sultan Mahmud II (r.1808–1839), who was encountering serious difficulties in dealing with the Greek revolt that had erupted against his rule in 1821. Once again, the powerful Egyptian vassal was called upon to help deal with an internal revolt within the Ottoman Empire. In 1824, Mehmed Ali answered his sovereign's call and dispatched a large army to the Peloponnese. Led by his son, Ibrahim Pasha, the new disciplined troops inflicted heavy defeats on the Greek insurgents. However, the European powers were determined to assist the Greeks to gain their independence from the Ottoman Empire, and on October 27, 1827 a combined British–French–Russian fleet destroyed the Egyptian fleet in Navarino, thus ending Egyptian presence in the Peloponnese. Crete, however, remained under Egyptian control till 1840.

Following the Greek debacle, Mehmed Ali assumed a more aggressive stance toward his sovereign, and in 1831 his troops invaded Syria and crossed into Anatolia, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire. An uneasy truce followed and lasted till 1839 when fighting flared once again, resulting in yet another victory by the Egyptians in the Battle of Nezib (July 24, 1839). Seeing that Mehmed Ali's military expansion now threatened the very existence of the Ottoman Empire, Britain convened a

conference of European powers, the Convention of London (July 1840), which forced him to return to the sultan all lands he had occupied. After Mehmed Ali had done so, the sultan issued a *firman* (edict) in 1841 recognizing him as hereditary governor of Egypt and the Sudan.

For the most part, Mehmed Ali's successors had no imperial ambitions and were content to remain within the new boundaries of Egypt and the Sudan. Khedive Ismail (r.1863–1879), however, was keen to expand Egyptian control to equatorial Africa where he sent more than one geographic expedition looking for the origins of the Nile. He was also intent on spreading his influence to the Red Sea ports of Suakin and Masawwa'. In 1863, his predecessor, Said Pasha (r.1854–1863), at the behest of Napoleon III of France, sent a battalion of Sudanese troops to Mexico to quell a popular uprising against Maximilian I. But it was Sudan that remained Egypt's main imperial possession, until the Mahdi revolt of 1881 seriously threatened Egypt's control, a control that was practically taken over by Britain when Egypt herself fell under British occupation in 1882.

Egypt's imperial expansion in the 19th century, therefore, was the direct result of Mehmed Ali's dynastic ambitions. Having little connection to the economic interests of any major social class within Egypt, these significant territorial possessions soon acquired an economic dimension, for Mehmed Ali was desperately seeking to raise enough revenue from the conquered territories to cover the cost of military occupation. Nevertheless, even in Syria and Crete, arguably the most lucrative "colonies," the Egyptian Empire never paid for itself.

As in other 19th-century empires, the colonies that Egypt acquired had a profound influence on the metropole, Cairo. For example, the administrative councils that were

established in Crete and the municipal ones founded in Syrian cities in the 1830s preceded and foreshadowed their counterparts that were to develop in Egypt in the 1850s onward. In a more general sense, military expansion with its concomitant medical, bureaucratic, and economic needs was instrumental to the very formation of the modern Egyptian state.

As with other imperial contexts, the balance sheet is mixed regarding the impact on the conquered territories. In some instances the Egyptian presence brought some benefits – for example, the first modern newspapers in Crete were printed by the Egyptian authorities. In Arabia, Mehmed Ali's army allowed the resumption of the annual pilgrimage, the Hajj, after the Wahhabis had suspended it for some years. In the Sudan, investments in agriculture and in education benefited the local population. And in Syria, municipal reforms improved the condition of many cities. However, the brutality with which the Egyptian army dealt with local resistance (especially in the early years of the Sudanese campaign), the lack of experience of governors sent from Cairo, and the heavy taxes that were imposed to cover the cost of the occupation left deep scars on the conquered peoples.

SEE ALSO: British Empire; 3. Africa;
Ottoman Empire; Wahhabi Empire

FURTHER READING

- Dunn, J. P. 2005. *Khedive Ismail's Army*. London: Routledge.
- Fahmy, K. 1997. *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fahmy, K. 2009. *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Hill, R. 1995. *A Black Corps d'élite: An Egyptian Sudanese Conscript Battalion with the French Army in Mexico, 1863–1867*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

- Lawson, F. 1992. *The Social Origins of Egyptian Expansionism During the Muhammad 'Ali Period*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moore-Harell, A. 2010. *Egypt's African Empire: Samuel Baker, Charles Gordon and the Creation of Equatoria*. Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.
- al-Sayyid Marsot, A. 1984. *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.